

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 18 April 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle

The first half of this programme, prior to the interval, will be performed without a break and without applause

Angela Hewitt piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) From *The Well-tempered Clavier* Book I (1722)
Prelude and Fugue in C BWV846
Prelude and Fugue in C minor BWV847
Prelude and Fugue in D BWV850
Prelude and Fugue in D minor BWV851
Prelude and Fugue in C sharp BWV848
Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor BWV849

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) Prelude and Fugue in E minor Op. 35 No. 1 (1827-41)

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975) Prelude and Fugue in F minor Op. 87 No. 18 (1950-1)

Samuel Barber (1910-1981) From Piano Sonata in E flat minor Op. 26 (1949)
Fuga • Allegro con spirito

Interval

Johann Sebastian Bach Partita No. 6 in E minor BWV830 (pub. 1731)
*I. Toccata • II. Allemande • III. Corrente • IV. Air •
V. Sarabande • VI. Tempo di Gavotta • VII. Gigue*



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As much as I adore performing the Preludes and Fugues of *The Well-tempered Clavier* by Johann Sebastian Bach, he is not the only composer who turned his hand to this genre for keyboard.

I thought it would therefore be interesting to hear a sequence of works including Bach, of course, but also Preludes and Fugues by Mendelssohn, Shostakovich and the American composer Samuel Barber – played without interruption and thus, hopefully, enhancing the effect.

The Mendelssohn and Barber are works I performed frequently in my teenage years, and my admiration for them has not faded with time. Mendelssohn's Fugue begins quietly, and then builds to a tremendous climax with the introduction of a chorale, very similar to *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*. It is a truly inspired moment, as is the quiet conclusion.

The Shostakovich is a more recent addition to my repertoire, learned for an evening of words and music I gave several years ago in Vienna with British author Julian Barnes (whose novel *The Noise of Time* is about Shostakovich).

Barber's Piano Sonata (written in 1949 for Vladimir Horowitz) finishes with a jazzy Fugue – a brilliant piece of writing for the piano (which Barber said could be performed separately). As Bach's music has been a great source of inspiration for many jazz musicians, its inclusion in tonight's programme seems very appropriate.

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The first half of this evening's programme is devoted to two musical forms. The first is the prelude, which up until the late 19th Century was really a functioning form of semi-improvisation. The great pianist Carl Czerny wrote a treatise on *The Art of Preluding*, providing pianists with a whole gamut of chord progressions and examples of developing them to suit any occasion or work. In fact it was considered standard to preface any sonata or larger work at home with a prelude in the character of the piece, a practice that faded with the rise of textual fidelity.

The pairing of the free prelude and the strictly ruled fugue forms the entirety of the mammoth *Well-tempered Clavier* by **Bach**, two full books of 24 each, in every major and minor key. Written as a form of teaching aid, not just in piano playing but in compositional practice, its reach has been far wider than Bach probably could have ever hoped, and all the pieces that follow after in this programme are either expanding, recreating or breaking away from what Bach established here.

We will hear the first six pairs from Book I, beginning with C major, whose Prelude of steadily strummed harmonic progressions is one of the most famous pieces of music ever written, followed by a gentle and clear-voiced Fugue in four voices. For C minor, that same progression from the previous Prelude is turned into a

scuttling *moto perpetuo* for both hands, followed by a wild fantasia that leads into the well-known Fugue with its menacing, Old-Testament theme. D major keeps a running motion in the right hand over plucked quavers in the left before launching into its rumbling fanfare based Fugue; D minor is jumpy and dark in its Prelude, while the C sharp major Prelude joyously ricochets from little finger to thumb. C sharp minor concludes tonight's set as one of the most inward and heartfelt, with one of the densest and most complex of the Fugues, exploring three different themes in five separate voices.

Mendelssohn shows a wider range of influences. The Prelude itself is much more in the Romantic style: huge arpeggios sweep across the keyboard, containing within them a hidden melody that makes Bach's C major Prelude look positively restrained. But Mendelssohn's real debt to (or obsession with) Bach is much more apparent in the handling of the Fugue, which begins with a transformation of the melody floated between the hands in the Prelude, gradually building until it opens up into a grand chorale which ends affectingly and quietly in four voices.

Shostakovich was inspired to write his own full cycle of 24 after hearing pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva while on the panel for the first Bach Competition in Leipzig. More closely modelled after the pattern of Bach, the F minor Prelude's long opening melody and chromatically wandering fugal finale nevertheless maintain its sound world as distinctively Shostakovich.

The **Barber** Piano Sonata was commissioned to display new voices in American composition, and it remodels the form of the Fugue in a distinctive and eclectic style. From the opening theme's jazz syncopations, the work goes through a whole variety of characters – western style cowboy music; strumming guitar; virtuoso cadenza – in a brilliant reinvention of the fugal idiom on New World terms.

At age 46, Bach published a set of six keyboard partitas as his Opus 1; not his first composition (by far) but rather a first permanent and public statement. Each is a collection of Italian dances, and the largest and most ambitious of the entire group is this sixth Partita. We continue our exploration of counterpoint with the opening *Toccat*a, which is bookended with sections of great emotional flourish but at its core is a fully fledged fugue. A poised *Allemande* comes after, followed by a unique *Corrente* whose remarkable syncopations are unlike any other version of this fast triple meter dance. A light but brief *Air* comes afterwards to set the stage for one of Bach's most inward and personal pieces of keyboard music: a minutely decorated *Sarabande* whose deeply felt harmonies and slow progression suspend time and emotion. Immediately we are taken back to dancing in a lively *Gavotta*, finishing in a fugal *Gigue*, whose angular steps bring the whole work to an exciting close.

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